A little over two months before his death in 1826, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to the University of Virginia’s newly appointed Professor of Natural History, John Patton Emmet, providing details for a botanical garden to accompany the fledgling school of Botany. This letter, composed on April 27th, set the wheels in motion for one of Jefferson’s final campaigns as founder and Rector of the University. Jefferson intended the botanical garden to be a significant and integral component of the “Academical Village,” helping to make the University of Virginia a complete educational experience for well-rounded young American men. Not an isolated effort, Jefferson’s plan for a botanical garden at his University was the culmination of his lifelong interest in plants and unending support of botanical study.

Long before any thoughts of creating a botanical garden for the benefit of students at the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson himself cultivated a constant and thriving passion for plants. While eager to acquire knowledge in many fields of study from an early age, including botany, much of his time and effort was devoted to a public career in politics. He still managed to find the time to pursue his many philosophical interests, especially after his retirement in 1809. Writing to Dr. Thomas Cooper in 1814, Jefferson stated:

Botany I rank with the most valuable sciences, whether we consider it’s subjects as furnishing the principal subsistence of life to man & beast, delicious varieties for our tables, refreshments from our orchards, the adornments of our flower-borders, shade and perfume of our groves,
materials for our buildings, or medicaments for our bodies… no country gentleman should be without what amuses every step he takes into his fields.¹

Jefferson’s infatuation with plants and botany ranged from the American natives found around his beloved Monticello in Virginia and in the other newly formed states, to the extensive collections of European natives and exotics that he encountered while serving as Minister to France from 1784 to 1789.

Jefferson and Botany

Botany was a topic often referenced and debated in letters between Jefferson and a growing number of fellow enthusiasts, both amateur and professional. In 1778, soon after Jefferson garnered fame as the author of the Declaration of American Independence, he wrote to the Florentine economist Giovanni Fabbroni, who published on a wide variety of topics including agriculture, botany, and chemistry, “Tho’ much of my time is employed in the councils of America I have yet a little leisure to indulge my fondness for philosophical studies.”² Continuing in a humble tone, he told Fabbroni “I wish I could gratify your Botanical taste; but I am acquainted with nothing more than the first principles of that science…” He then went on to assure Fabbroni that he and his friends would do all that they could to acquire American botanical specimens that could not be found in Italy.

The collection and exchange of useful, beautiful, and curious plants had become a nearly requisite pastime for European gentlemen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such an interest soon caught on in America, especially with gentlemen planters like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Washington and Jefferson, as early leaders of the new nation, also had the future of their country in mind when studying and cultivating plants. Jefferson succinctly stated his opinion regarding the importance of plants around 1800: “The greatest service which can be rendered any country is to add an useful plant to its culture.”

During his years abroad while serving as Minister to France from 1784 to 1789, Jefferson diligently worked towards providing this service. In France, Jefferson socialized with people who proved to be nearly as enthusiastic about plants as Jefferson himself, thus forming relationships that increased his own plant knowledge and enabled numerous plant exchanges. One of Jefferson’s French acquaintances, Simon-Charles Boutin, promised Jefferson seeds of dry rice from China. Jefferson was in search of a type of rice that did not need to be cultivated in wet lowlands, thus improving the stagnant growing conditions in America that were “so fatal to human health and life.” To that end, Jefferson even went so far as to smuggle some grains of rice out of Italy in his own pockets. In several notable letters sent to correspondents in America, Jefferson explained the benefits of dry rice, olive trees, and the cork oak, shipping many specimens

and seeds of each to America on multiple occasions. In another one of Jefferson’s many attempts to advance America’s agricultural standards, he sent sainfoin seeds to the South Carolina Society for Promoting Agriculture in 1786. Jefferson gathered the seeds from this soil-improving legume from his own garden at the Hotel de Langeac in Paris.

Thomas Jefferson commenced particularly beneficial relationships with acquaintances made at the Jardin du Roi in Paris. The Jardin du Roi began as a teaching and medicinal garden in 1626, then later came to house the country’s natural history collection under the illustrious directorship of the Comte de Buffon (Figure 1). While visiting the Jardin du Roi, Jefferson developed a lasting friendship with Andre Thouin. Thouin, head gardener at the time, was later to become the garden’s director in its new incarnation as the French National Garden, the Jardin des Plantes. Jefferson and Thouin exchanged many seeds over the years, especially after Jefferson’s return to Virginia. In 1808, Jefferson’s “old friend” sent him 700 species of exotic seeds that he then shared with nurseryman Bernard McMahon of Philadelphia because he did not have to time to care for them. In thanks, Thouin later received seeds and plants collected on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Jefferson was also delighted to receive an assortment of rice species from Thouin for his persistent effort to ameliorate the swampy conditions for America’s rice growers.

While the majority of Jefferson’s time abroad was spent in and around Paris, he also traveled further afield to southern France, northern Italy, Holland, the Rhine Valley, and England. Just as he advised other Americans traveling in Europe, Jefferson paid

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9 Rice 87-9.
10 McEwan 69, 179.
particular attention to, among other things, the agriculture and gardens of the various regions, and took copious notes on the subjects.\footnote{Thomas Jefferson, \textit{Jefferson Abroad}, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Lucia Stanton (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 249-251.} During March and April of 1786 Jefferson resided in London and toured a number of English gardens in his spare time. Accompanied by John Adams on one such five-day tour of great country estates, Jefferson frequently consulted his copy of Thomas Whately’s \textit{Observations on Modern Gardening} (1770) and also made opinionated comments of his own on the successes and failures of the gardens’ design and architecture.\footnote{Jefferson, \textit{Jefferson Abroad}, 65-69.}

Due to his personal interest in plants, it is surprising that Jefferson hardly mentioned any of the diverse plant varieties that he would have encountered on his journeys in England. England at this time was making large strides as the epicenter of international plant trade, its many gardens brimming with the newest and the most enviable acquisitions. Jefferson also visited the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which Sir Joseph Banks had recently begun to augment as the world’s premier collection of plants.\footnote{Richard Drayton, \textit{Nature’s Government} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 85-128.} However, Jefferson’s notes on the visit merely described the “Archimedes’ screw for raising water” and left out any recognition of the many plant species that he must have seen there.\footnote{Jefferson, \textit{Jefferson Abroad}, 69.} Also, while he visited Oxford with John Adams, Jefferson appears to have made no observations on the town, nor on its veteran botanical garden, which was established in 1621.

Although Jefferson may not have considered himself an authority on botany, he consistently championed the study of the subject and even received recognition for his knowledge in the field. In 1792, natural historian Benjamin Smith Barton read a paper

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before the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in which he honored Jefferson by giving the name *Jeffersonia* to a small genus of plants (Figure 2).\(^{15}\) Of the two species that make up the genus, *Jeffersonia diphylla* is a plant native to eastern North America while *Jeffersonia dubia* is found in Asia. Barton’s stated reason for bestowing this honor on Jefferson was because “In the various departments of this science, but especially in botany and zoology, the information of this gentleman is equaled by that of few persons in the United-States.”

After serving many trying years as Governor of Virginia, Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice-President, and for two terms as President of the United States, Jefferson finally retired to “the tranquil pursuits of science” at Monticello.\(^{16}\) At last, he was able to turn his attention to, among other things, his books, grandchildren, farms, and gardens. Writing from Monticello to Benjamin Smith Barton in 1810, Jefferson claimed “my mind has been so long ingrossed by other objects, that those I loved most have escaped from it, and none more than botany…”\(^{17}\) While this may have been the case temporarily, Jefferson was soon debating the currently competing systems devised for plant and animal classification with Dr. John Manners in 1814. He concluded this five-page letter with a brief summary of his viewpoint:

> I adhere to the Linnean because it is sufficient as a groundwork; admits of supplementary insertions, as new productions are discovered, and mainly because it has got into so general use that it will not be easy to displace it,

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and still less to find another which shall have the same singular fortune of obtaining the general consent.\textsuperscript{18}

Carl Linnaeus, the eighteenth century Swedish botanist, devised the popular system of “artificial” classification and the simple method of binomial nomenclature, both of which made the study of botany accessible to a larger number of interested people.\textsuperscript{19}

Jefferson and American Botanical Gardens

Thomas Jefferson learned much of his botanical knowledge from books in his own library such as Linnaeus’s 1762 \textit{Species Plantarum} and Philip Miller’s \textit{Gardener’s Dictionary}, 8\textsuperscript{th} edition, and from the observation of plants growing in his own gardens, fields, and forests.\textsuperscript{20} However, botanical gardens, in addition to herbariums, commonly provided the student of botany with a place to observe and compare a large sampling of the plant kingdom. Modeled after monastic gardens of the medieval period, Europe’s earliest botanical gardens were established in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century to accompany the great Universities, first in Padua in 1545, followed by notable gardens at Leyden (1587), Oxford (1621), and Paris (1626) (Figure 3).\textsuperscript{21} Like the monastic gardens, these early botanical gardens contained medicinal plants, or simples. For the adjoining schools of medicine and botany, the botanical gardens provided a place to study a wide-ranging collection of living plants. As the Age of Exploration flourished, these gardens came to house the burgeoning collections of newly discovered plant species, thus increasing their significance. In addition to the medicinal plants important for the health of the people,

many early botanical gardens boasted plant collections from the four known continents, Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, displaying the newfound knowledge of the magnitude of God’s creation in a new Garden of Eden. While the medicinal and religious foundations of these gardens continued to be of significance, it was their economic value to the imperial powers that spread botanical gardens across the world. The colonies of the tropics and America provided sources and places to cultivate economically important plants such as cinchona, rubber, coffee, spices, and cotton.

Perhaps due to his well-known interest in plants and botany, Jefferson received a number of letters from various correspondents concerning the establishment of, as well as shipments to, botanical gardens in the United States. William Roscoe, co-founder and first president of the Liverpool Botanic Garden, wrote a letter of introduction to the recently retired Jefferson in 1809 concerning the forthcoming botanical expedition of fellow Englishman John Bradbury. In August 1809, on his way to explore Kentucky and the Louisiana Territory at the behest of the Liverpool Botanic Garden, Bradbury first stopped at Monticello to officially meet Jefferson and also to deliver Roscoe’s Address at the Opening of the Botanic Garden of Liverpool as well as A Catalogue of Plants in the Botanic Garden, at Liverpool (1808). These two documents would have given Jefferson a good idea of the standard mission and typical plant collections of botanical gardens in Europe at the time, which were focusing most of their energies on the support of economic botany for the benefit of the imperial powers.

22 Prest 1-10.
After returning from his plant-collecting mission to the western frontier in 1812, Bradbury wrote to Jefferson to inquire about rumors relating to the establishment of a botanical garden in the city of Washington.\textsuperscript{26} Bradbury hoped to be considered for the position of Superintendent and wondered if Jefferson could put in a good word for him with those in charge of such a venture. He also pointed out that his “extensive acquaintance amongst the Naturalists in Great Britain,” as well as his recent findings in Louisiana, would be of great advantage to this new endeavor. At the time, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, under the direction of Sir Joseph Banks, was leading the way in the cultivation and dissemination of plants valuable to England and her colonies. No doubt the connections with British botanists, including those working under the banner of Kew, would have been quite a boost to a budding botanical garden in America. However, Jefferson provided Bradbury with a prompt response to his botanical garden inquiry: “be assured it is an idea without the least foundation.”\textsuperscript{27} While Jefferson agreed, “no doubt it is desired by every friend of science,” he did not believe that the current government would support the garden’s establishment.

Another of Jefferson’s correspondents, William Thornton, was considerably more determined than Bradbury to see a botanical garden established in the nation’s capital. Thornton, a physician and architect most notable for designing the United States Capitol, exchanged many letters with Jefferson over the years, especially related to matters of agriculture and manufactures. Writing to Jefferson from the city of Washington on


August 30, 1809, several years before Bradbury showed interest in the subject, Thornton noted, “Nothing has yet been done towards the Establishment of a Botanic Garden. Mr. Hamilton has a thousand valuable Exotics to dispose of at this time at the woodlands.”

William Hamilton, owner of the Woodlands near Philadelphia, and was another friend with which Jefferson shared botanical interests (Figure 4). Jefferson wrote one more friend, Dr. Caspar Wistar, in 1807, that he hoped to send his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, to Philadelphia for his education, believing that Philadelphia was home to the most learned scientific minds, including Mr. Hamilton of the Woodlands.

In a letter from 1808, Jefferson referred to Hamilton’s Woodlands as a botanical garden where some of the seeds brought back by Lewis and Clark “have been very successfully raised.” Although Jefferson later responded to Thornton’s gift of figs and tarragon that accompanied the 1809 letter, he left out any reference to a botanical garden.

Writing to Jefferson in 1812, Thornton again raised the matter of a botanical garden in Washington. Revealing his direct involvement in the endeavor, Thornton notified Jefferson that he applied to Congress to allow Charles Whitlow to take charge of the area “destined for a Botanical Garden” near the President’s Square. Appealing to Jefferson’s particular interest in useful plants, Thornton described Whitlow as “the person

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who has made so many valuable Discoveries in this Country of new Plants, and lately one of immense Importance as a substitute for Flax and Hemp.” Thornton then tried to attract Jefferson’s attention with mention of Whitlow’s ties to the collections of the botanical gardens of the Universities of Edinburgh and Cambridge. While Jefferson, in his response to Thornton’s letter, did comment on Whitlow’s possible substitute for flax and hemp, he again made no reference to Thornton’s entreaties for a botanical garden in the nation’s capital. Then again, five years later, Thornton brought up the nation’s need for a botanical garden. In addition to the *Urtica*, or flax and hemp substitute, Whitlow had also discovered a new species of *Asclepias* in Canada.\(^\text{33}\) Therefore, Thornton wrote, “If we only had here a botanic garden, we could send various valuable seeds to all parts of our country- and render incalculable benefits.” No response from Jefferson to this letter has yet been found.

Perhaps Jefferson was too busy to reply to Thornton on these matters because the year, 1817, was one of considerable importance for the beginnings of the University of Virginia, then called Central College.\(^\text{34}\) 1817 saw the first meeting of the Board of Visitors in May, which included two other Presidents, Madison and Monroe, as well as the laying of the first cornerstone on October sixth. Jefferson was occupied with the design and construction of his Academical Village and asked Thornton to make a few sketches of ideas for the Pavilions that would “help us to provide snug and handsome Lodges” for the professors.\(^\text{35}\) In addition to Thornton’s extensive notes on architecture in

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35 Jefferson to Thornton, May 9 1817, #38-174, in *The Jefferson Papers of the University of Virginia, Special Collections*, University of Virginia Library.
response, he also made suggestions for the school’s grounds, including groves of trees, a fountain for ornament and in case of fire, a pond for swimming and skating, and, understandably due to Thornton’s previously demonstrated interests, a botanical garden.36

A second early advocate for a botanical garden at the University of Virginia was Dr. Thomas Cooper, a longtime friend of Jefferson’s with many similar philosophical interests who was selected to be the University’s first professor of chemistry, mineralogy, and natural philosophy, as well as a temporary law professor.37 Writing to Jefferson in 1819 with suggestions for the University, Dr. Cooper revealed that both he and Abbe Correa da Serra, a visiting Portuguese naturalist, recommended the Englishman Thomas Nuttall as botanist because of his extensive knowledge of American plants.38 Cooper then went on to say “I wish a botanical garden was established, for it grieves me to see the annual present of seeds from the Jardin des Plantes to the Agricultural Society here, so negligently thrown away.” However, due to complications over construction delays and religious opposition, Dr. Cooper gave up his position at the University and was soon replaced by Dr. John Patton Emmet who was required to teach botany himself, along with the other sciences first delegated to Dr. Cooper.

Before Dr. Emmet was selected as Professor of Natural History, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque vied heavily for the position. Rafinesque, a naturalist who had met and impressed Jefferson once in 1804, wrote him numerous letters between 1819 and 1824 in a great effort to offer his “zeal and industry” in the teaching of Botany, Zoology,

37 Cunningham 341.
38 Dr. Thomas Cooper to Jefferson, June 21 1819, #38-174, in The Jefferson Papers of the University of Virginia, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
Mineralogy, and various other branches of science at the University of Virginia. In addition to presenting the University with his considerable collection of mineral, animal, and plant specimens, Rafinesque proposed to establish and direct a botanical garden at his own expense, except for the cost of accompanying buildings and the salary of a gardener, and to supply this garden with his own stock of 300 to 400 kinds of European seeds, to be augmented annually by the addition of 1000 species of seeds from his various acquaintances. While Jefferson claimed to have put Rafinesque’s requests for employment before the Board of Visitors on multiple occasions, his strong desire to teach the sciences at the University of Virginia was never fulfilled.

While Jefferson showed some reluctance in becoming involved in the creation of various new botanical gardens, he obligingly accepted the role of middleman in the exchange of seeds, especially between European sources and botanical gardens at home in the United States. Jefferson directed many of these shipments from overseas, including the annual box from Thouin, to the botanical garden begun by physician David Hosack in New York City, the Elgin Botanical Garden. Begun in 1801, the garden was comprised of twenty acres around the site of what is now Rockefeller Center (Figure 5). Jefferson recommended that seeds be forwarded to Hosack’s botanical garden in 1816, 1818, and 1821. Writing to Jonathan Thompson in 1821, Jefferson explained that the Jardin des

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Plantes in Paris sent seeds to him annually, “depending on my applying it for the public benefit,” therefore he “generally had them delivered for a public garden at Philadelphia [possibly Bernard McMahon’s nursery and botanical garden] or to Dr. Hosack for the Botanical Garden at N. York.”

It is essential to note that Jefferson could have sent these particular seeds to any one of his numerous plant-loving acquaintances, as he did on many occasions. However, both he and the French botanists believed that plants should be grown not merely for their ornamental qualities but more importantly for their ability to improve the nation’s agriculture and economy. Botanical gardens provided the proper location for the cultivation and dissemination of such beneficial plants.

Jefferson also considered the Cambridge Botanic Garden at Harvard College a worthy recipient of useful seeds, instructing a correspondent to forward seeds sent from Marseilles there in 1820. Established in 1807, the garden was directed by William Dandridge Peck until 1822 (Figure 6). Peck’s successor was Thomas Nuttall, the botanist recommended several years earlier by Dr. Cooper to be employed by the University of Virginia. In 1818, Peck compiled *A Catalogue of American and Foreign Plants Cultivated in the Botanic Garden, Cambridge, Massachusetts* in which he wrote “The Botanic Garden at Cambridge was intended for the cultivation of plants from various parts of the world, to facilitate the acquisition of botanical knowledge. It was also

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45 Hedrick 422.
intended to receive all such indigenous trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, as are worthy of attention, as being useful in domestic economy, in the arts, or in medicine.” 

As the Cambridge Botanic Garden was established to accompany a school of higher education just as the one at the University of Virginia was so intended, it is most likely that Jefferson’s garden would have had a comparable mission and planting list. While winters in Massachusetts are certainly longer and colder than those in Virginia, and the summers not as hot, the relatively similar climate can support many of the same plants and trees.

“To be pursued at all spare times:” The University of Virginia Botanical Garden, 1826

After many years of consistent botanical interest and support, as well as some hesitations, Jefferson finally put his full authority behind his own botanical garden at the University of Virginia. Just as Jefferson intended the varying architectural styles of the Academical Village’s ten Pavilions to educate students outside of the formal classroom setting, so too was the botanical garden meant to enhance learning through the observation and comparison of living plants. The main burst of correspondence over the establishment of the University’s botanical garden began in late April and continued through May of 1826. In his initial 3-page letter on the subject to Professor Emmet, dated April 27, Jefferson explained his intentions and enclosed a numbered list of exacting specifications to help guide the founding of this teaching garden under Professor

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Emmet’s direction. It is clear from a few of Jefferson’s comments that he and Emmet had recently met in person to discuss these and other matters but Jefferson needed to sit down and commit his ideas to paper.

In order for the school of Botany to commence the following year, with its requisite botanical garden in place, Jefferson described four operations that must be undertaken at once (Figure 7). First, he described a suitable piece of ground, of approximately six acres, that he selected “on the public road, at the upper corner of our possessions, where the stream issues from them.” This ground was located at the western edge of the University’s land, behind the Anatomical Theatre and just south of Three Notched Road that connected Charlottesville with both Richmond and the west. For this botanical garden, “the bottom ground would suit for the garden of plants, the hill sides for the trees.” Next, he wrote that the garden should be enclosed by a serpentine brick wall, the hill sides terraced, and the flat land formed into beds and allies (Figure 8).

Lastly, plants “thought necessary and sufficient for botanical purposes” and trees that “we propose to introduce” should be chosen. For the plants with “botanical purposes,” Jefferson had in mind “objects of use,” not of “mere curiosity.” Although Jefferson does not appear to have made a list of plants for the University’s botanical garden, the 1818 Catalogue of American and Foreign Plants Cultivated in the Botanic Garden, Cambridge, Massachusetts can serve as a guide because that garden was established for similar purposes. Therefore, useful plants listed in Peck’s Catalogue that may have been found in the University’s garden were natives such as Indian corn (Zea

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mays) and American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), as well as imports like Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and Flax (*Linum usitatissimum*). Jefferson hoped to obtain many of the plant seeds from his own countrymen as well as from his friend Andre Thouin, Superintendent of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, who sent Jefferson an annual box of exotic but adaptable seeds. For the trees, Jefferson suggested collecting from various sources “exotics of distinguished usefulness” such as the Cork oak, Catechu or Indian rubber tree of Nepal, and the Teak tree of Burma (Figure 9).

The Celebrated Mentor- Abbe Jose Francisco Correa da Serra

In this same letter to Emmet, Jefferson referred to Abbe Correa, a celebrated Portuguese botanist and naturalist who spent 1812 to 1820 in America, first as a curious visitor and then in an official capacity as the Portuguese Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States.48 Both members of the American Philosophical Society, Jefferson and Correa became fast friends who shared a passion for the intellectual stimulation of botany, among other sciences. Correa made almost yearly visits to Monticello to see both Jefferson and his son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, a fellow plants enthusiast. On one such visit, it appears that Correa composed a “Plan for a Botanic garden for a public school, on the most useful, and less expensive plan.”49 Although the pages are neither dated nor signed, an endorsement in Jefferson’s hand reads “Botanical garden for the University, Mr. Correa’s observations.” The plan may have been written by Correa during his last visit to Monticello in 1820 because Jefferson wrote to William Short on

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49 Abbe Jose Francisco Correa da Serra, “Plan for a Botanic garden for a public school, on the most useful, and less expensive plan,” #7254-b, in *Papers concerning the establishment and construction of the University of Virginia, 1817-1826*, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
August 4, 1820, “Mr. Correa is here, on his farewell visit to us. He has been much pleased with the plan and progress of our University, and has given some valuable hints to its botanical branch.”

Correa introduced his botanical garden plan with a criticism of the numerous contemporary botanical gardens that “seem rather destined to increase the catalogue of the species and genera of vegetables, than to furnish to students useful notions of the vegetable kingdom,” calling them “expensive gardens of mere curiosity.” What follows is a numbered plan that called first for the study of plant anatomy and physiology, then the teaching and application of the classification systems of Linnaeus and Jussieu, next “the last and most useful part…the knowledge of the use of vegetables, for food of man and beast, for medicine, for dying, for building, for clothing, for ornament, etc.,” and also the knowledge of plants that have had a place in history, superstition, civil usages, and classical writing. For technical instructions, Correa succinctly stated that the garden should be separated into four acres for approximately 1500 plants, especially those not native to Virginia, and two acres for a grove of trees, none of which could be found growing naturally in Virginia.

As Jefferson explained to Emmet, he believed Correa to be the most learned man, “above all others,” in botany. As Jefferson wanted the best for his University, he “availed myself of his [Correa’s] presence and friendship to obtain from him a general idea of the extent of ground we should employ, and the number and character of the plants we should introduce into it.” Therefore, for the botanical garden at the University of Virginia, Jefferson remained true to much of Correa’s earlier plan. Jefferson also

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enclosed a copy of Correa’s plan with this letter to Emmet so that he could avail himself of Correa’s specifications. As Correa instructed, the University’s garden was to be six acres, four acres for useful plants both native and foreign, and two acres for a grove of exotic trees, and the plant classification methods of both Linnaeus and Jussieu were to be utilized.

In addition to emulating Correa’s botanical expertise, Jefferson also appreciated the fact that his instructions were on “the less expensive plan.” Lack of sufficient funding had long plagued the early years of the University, delaying the opening of the school by nearly ten years after the first cornerstone had been laid in 1817. Although Jefferson was careful to not to overspend, he could not help but want the best for his University, for example insisting on marble capitals and bases imported from Carrara, Italy for the Rotunda. It appears that for the botanical garden, Jefferson intended to be especially frugal. He called Correa’s plan “the more satisfactory for me, as it coincided with the moderate views to which our endowments as yet confine us” and, in describing the plan to Emmet, he employed words such as “restrained” and “indulging not at all.” He was also relieved that Correa was “especially not yet thinking of a hot house, or even of a Green-house.” It also seems that Jefferson planned to obtain most of the garden’s plant collection from seeds gifted to them by friends and acquaintances. Of course the garden would not have been without expense as the terracing of the hillsides, the serpentine wall, and other site preparations would have required substantial labor and funds, but overall, Jefferson intended this to be a modest, intellectually stimulating teaching garden, not an ornamental pleasure ground.
Emmet’s prompt response to Jefferson the following day assured him that he was in total agreement over the utility of such a garden that would teach students the important science of Botany through the study of plant physiology. Rejecting gardens kept “in the pursuit of useless species,” Emmet commended the type of garden that would “inspire an active and practical Botanist.” Although Emmet began his four-page letter with a positive reaction to Jefferson’s plans for him as director of the botanical garden, he devoted the majority of the pages to explaining that he only had limited knowledge of Botany, Zoology, and Rural Economy, which he was required to teach along with his favored subject, Chemistry. In conclusion, Emmet revealed his hope that in the near future he would be relieved of a few of his many duties, including management of the botanical garden.

Several days later, on May 2, Jefferson replied to Emmet’s hesitations concerning his ability to properly teach courses on topics other than Chemistry. Over the course of three pages, Jefferson carefully explained to Emmet that his worries were normal “at the commencement of every undertaking” and that the institution could at first only afford to support eight professors who would each be required to teach a range of subjects. Jefferson then pointed out that the function of the University was to give its students a broad foundation from which they could then further their own interests, rather than “expect our schools to turn out their alumni already enthroned on the pinnacles of their respective sciences.” The following day, Jefferson lamented to his friend James Madison,

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soon to be the next Rector of the University, that “I have percieved [sic] in some of our
Professors a disinclination to the preparing themselves for entering on the branches of
science with which they are charged additionally to their principal one,” naming Emmet
as one such wary professor. 53

Despite his reluctance, Emmet soon asked the University’s Proctor, Arthur
Brockenbrough, for the use of laborers to begin the difficult tasks of leveling, clearing,
and terracing the ground selected for the botanical garden. 54 Emmet let Brockenbrough
know that “Mr. Jefferson is anxious that the Botanic Garden should be commenced
immediately,” a common refrain in multiple letters on the subject. On May 13, Emmet
was forced to tell Jefferson that Brockenbrough had yet to answer his request for
assistance in beginning work on the garden. 55 He admitted that the Proctor and workmen
were surely busy with the recent arrival from Italy of the marble capitals and bases
intended for the Rotunda but that at least six laborers were necessary to make the land
suitable for use as a botanical garden.

Emmet then closed this same letter with concern for the viability of the seeds sent
from the Jardin des Plantes in Paris to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle as he
himself had not had success with seeds from this source. The day before, Jefferson had
passed on the news to Emmet that he had finally heard from Madison of the death of his

53 Jefferson to James Madison, May 3 1826, in The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress,
1607-1827, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mtj1&fileName=mtj1page055.db&recNum=1051> (accessed on August 27, 2009).
54 Emmet to Brockenbrough, no date, #R/G-5/3, in Papers of the Proctors of the University of Virginia,
1819-1903, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. The exact date of this letter is unclear.
Emmet wrote what appears to be “Sunday 9th.” According to the calendar of 1826, the ninth fell on a
Sunday in April. However, the chronology of events indicates that Emmet wrote this letter in May, most
likely on the seventh, after Jefferson began correspondence on the subject on April 27. It is either possible
that Emmet’s seven looks like a nine, as the seventh fell on a Sunday in May 1826, or that he simply had
his date wrong.
55 Emmet to Jefferson, May 13 1826, HM 9352, in Thomas Jefferson collection, 1764-1826, The
Huntington Library, San Marino, Ca.
friend Andre Thouin of the Jardin des Plantes but that Thouin’s annual gift of a box of seeds was continued by his successor and that just such a box had recently arrived in New York. In another letter of the same day, Jefferson took the liberty of writing to James Barbour, Madison’s successor as President of the Agricultural Society of Albemarle and former Governor of Virginia, requesting that this box be sent to the University.

Jefferson explained to Barbour “As we had no public garden in this state, I had always sent them to those other states,” such as David Hosack’s botanic garden in New York City. However, “we begin exactly this year to want them for the botanical garden of our University which we are now beginning.” Responding to Jefferson on May 16, Barbour promised that he would relay the message to the French Consul to ensure that the box of seeds would be forwarded to Jefferson’s University.

In the following weeks, two letters written by Jefferson conveyed his unmistakable feelings towards the commencement of the botanical garden. On May 20, Jefferson composed “some notes of things of strong urgency” for fellow Board of Visitor member John Hartwell Cocke. In addition to the problems of the leaking Rotunda dome and failing cisterns, Jefferson listed “Dr. Emmet and myself think we have found a piece of ground for the Botanical garden far superior to any other spot we possess. this work should be begun immediately; but I should request your advice in it.” The second

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59 Jefferson to John Hartwell Cocke, May 20 1826, #38-163, in *The Jefferson Papers of the University of Virginia*, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
mention of the urgency of the establishment of the botanical garden appeared in a list of instructions that Jefferson wrote for Arthur Brockenbrough. Number eleven on the list, after such necessities as repairing pipes bringing water from the nearby Observatory Mountain and making 200 wooden guns, instructed Brockenbrough “the botanical garden, after being laid off under the direction of Dr. Emmet, is to be pursued at all spare times.”

After numerous letters on the subject of the botanical garden, notably throughout the month of May, 1826, Jefferson appears to have let the topic rest in June, passing away soon after, on July 4. One further mention of work in the botanical garden is made on August 20, 1826. In this letter, Brockenbrough alerted Cocke of the current state of things at the University, mentioning that in a few days, after the cross streets had been McAdamized, “I have instructed the overseer then to put the Labourer in the Botanical garden (after doing a few small jobs) under the direction of Dr. Emmet.” This letter seems to indicate that work, to what extent it is not known, had in fact begun on the garden.

Although Brockenbrough may have finally been willing to lend assistance in the construction of the botanical garden, the actions of Professor Emmet on October 1, 1826, ended the momentum created by Jefferson. In a letter to the Board of Visitors, Emmet briefly repeated the complaints previously made to Jefferson concerning his overly busy schedule and lack of knowledge on the subjects of Botany and Rural Economy.

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60 Jefferson to Arthur Brockenbrough, c. May 1826, #TB-2324, in The Jefferson Papers of the University of Virginia, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
61 Brockenbrough to Cocke, August 20 1826, ***, in Cocke Family Papers, 1725-1939, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
62 Emmet to the Board of Visitors, October 1 1826, #11923, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
Therefore, “These considerations compel me to express a wish that I may be relieved from them [the teaching of Botany and Rural Economy] and the charge of the botanic garden.” The Board of Visitors reached a decision on October 7th in favor of Emmet’s wishes; "Resolved that professor Emmet be authorised [sic] to suspend, till the further decision of the Visitors, the discharge of his duties as professor of Natural History, in regard to the Botanic Garden, & the subjects of Botany and Rural Economy.”

Therefore, what little construction, if any, had begun on the garden’s site was officially ended on this day, and thus the University of Virginia was deprived of its founder’s intended botanical garden.

Epilogue

While John Patton Emmet’s resignation of his duties as professor of botany and director of the botanical garden effectively ended Jefferson’s short-lived quest for a botanical garden at the University, his dream lived on in various other fashions. Mention of a botanical garden appears again in the Board of Visitors minutes on July 20, 1831:

Resolved, That the Executive Committee cause the kitchen garden contiguous to the Anatomical Theatre to be removed at the end of the current year, and that they cause the square of ground around that building and extending to the small brick building in the Valley below to be laid down in lawn and planted with trees, with reference to the suitable improvement of the ground as part of the future botanic garden.

Therefore, five years after Emmet caused the abrupt end of the University’s botanical garden, the minutes of 1831 show that the Board of Visitors still retained the intention of creating this “future botanic garden.” Apparently nothing was done that year to honor this

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63 Board of Visitors, The University of Virginia, Minutes, vol. 1 (October 7, 1826), 130.
64 BOV Minutes, vol. 2 (July 20, 1831), 277.
resolution because two years later they again asked for the removal of the kitchen garden next to the Anatomical Theatre and for the planting of grass and trees. Clearly, the Visitors’ resolutions did not always result in actions taking place.

Although Professor Emmet was relieved of his professional duty as superintendent of the University’s botanical garden, he went on to pursue his own personal interest in the subject of botany at his new home, Morea. In 1831, the Board of Visitors decided to grant Emmet’s request concerning the cultivation of land near the University to grow mulberry trees for the culture of silk, as long as it did not interfere with his professorial duties. By 1833, Emmet was allowed to move out of Pavilion I so that he could reside at Morea (from Morus, Latin for mulberry), which was practically adjacent to the western edge of the proposed botanical garden. At Morea he began to establish a notable arboretum, just as he might have done in a more official capacity for Jefferson and the University.

It is also interesting to note that Abbe Correa’s “Plan for a botanic garden for a public school,” upon which Jefferson based his botanical garden ideas, appears again in the correspondence of the Jefferson family. On December 15, 1830, Jefferson’s daughter Martha Randolph wrote from Washington to her son-in-law Joseph Coolidge of Boston requesting “a copy of the scheme for a botanic garden which you promised to have copied for me.” In addition to the copy that appears to be in Correa’s own hand, there exists another copy of the plan in a different hand, sent to Martha Randolph in Boston in the care of Joseph Coolidge from the University of Virginia on November 3, with no year.

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65 BOV Minutes, vol. 2 (July 19, 1833), 305.
66 BOV Minutes, vol. 1 (July 15, 1831), 258.
67 BOV Minutes, vol. 2 (July 20, 1833), 309.
68 Martha Randolph to Joseph Coolidge, December 15 1830, #9090, Box 2, in Ellen Wayles Randolph Coolidge Correspondence, 1810-1861, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
given. On this copy Mrs. Randolph wrote “by Mr. Correa de Serra” at the top and made a few corrections. Presumably, this is the copy that Mrs. Randolph asked Joseph Coolidge to make another copy from to send to her in Washington. Mrs. Randolph does not indicate why she should want a copy of such a plan, perhaps to assist the “future botanic garden” that the Board of Visitors still envisioned for the University in 1831, or maybe to improve the relatively new United States Botanic Garden established in Washington in 1820.

In the years following Jefferson’s death, after his plans for a botanical garden were abandoned, the area to the west and down the hill from the Academical Village was mostly neglected. Meadow Creek continued to fill informal ponds on the site, just as the creek once fed the small ponds used for making bricks in Jefferson’s day (Figure 10). Then in the early twentieth century, with the growth of the University, this area was actively developed. The informal ponds were converted to a grand formal reflecting pool to compliment Memorial Gymnasium, completed in 1924 (Figure 11). Today, no water features remain on the site. The reflecting pool was eventually drained and filled and Meadow Creek was sent underground in pipes. The level area where Jefferson envisioned his botanical garden is now divided into “Nameless Field” and the courts of the Snyder Tennis Center (Figures 12, 13). The hillsides where the terraced arboretum would have been were leveled to some extent and now support both Alderman Library and Clemons Library. However, when viewing the site today, the topography continues to reveal some of the conditions that Jefferson found suitable to sustain a botanical garden. The land

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slopes down to a relatively level expanse of open ground and buildings have yet to dominate the landscape.

In spite of the valiant efforts of the elderly and ailing Jefferson, as well as the minor attempts made by the Board of Visitors following his death, a botanical garden at the University of Virginia was never established. Such a teaching garden was not merely an afterthought or an unnecessary flight of fancy for Jefferson but an essential component of a full education that included the pursuit of scientific knowledge. While Jefferson experimented with many plants, both useful and beautiful, in his private collection at Monticello, his proposed botanical garden at the University would have gone much further in educating students, and therefore Americans, in the economic and beneficial qualities of plants.
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Figure 1. Jardin du Roi, Paris. Plan by Gabriel Thouin, from *Plans raisonnés de toutes les espèces de jardins*, 1820.

Figure 2. *Jeffersonia diphylla*. Drawn by Benjamin Smith Barton (1766-1815). Image courtesy of the American Philosophical Society. Permission to publish required.
Figure 3. Botanical garden plans from *The Garden of Eden*, by John Prest.

Figure 7. Conjectural diagram of the proposed botanical garden at the University of Virginia, c. 1830, based on Jefferson’s specifications in his letter to John Patton Emmet, April 27, 1826. Note the close proximity to the Academical Village, the original center of the University. Diagram by Jenny Jones.
Figure 8. Conjectural plan of the proposed botanical garden at the University of Virginia, c. 1830. Plan by Jenny Jones.
Figure 9. Conjectural perspective view from within the proposed botanical garden at the University of Virginia, looking East towards the Rotunda and the Anatomical Theatre, c. 1830. Drawing by Jenny Jones.
Figure 10. Pond near the site of Memorial Gymnasium, 1894. Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

Figure 11. Memorial Gymnasium and reflecting pool, date unknown. Photograph by Ralph Thompson. Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
Figure 12. The site of the proposed botanical garden today, looking east across “Nameless Field” towards Alderman Library. Photograph by Lily Fox-Bruguiere.

Figure 13. The site of the proposed botanical garden today, looking west across “Nameless Field” toward the Snyder Tennis Center and Memorial Gymnasium. Photograph by Lily Fox-Bruguiere.